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## **Zeitgeist Archaeology: Conflict, Identity, and Ideology at Prague Castle, 1918–2018**

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### **Abstract**

The discovery of a 1,100+-year-old high-status burial in the oldest part of Prague Castle in 1928 led to a century of multiple identifications created by two World Wars and the Cold War. Identified variously as a Viking and Slavic warrior according to Nazi and Soviet ideologies, the body and its material culture were entangled also with the fate of its discoverer and interpreter, Ivan Borkovský, the remains and commemorative monuments of two Czech Unknown Soldiers, and the creation of the Czechoslovak state. The epic saga is a mirror reflecting the fate of Czechoslovakia and Central Europe across the twentieth century.

### **Introduction**

Sometimes archaeology is confusing, and on closer inspection can prove more complicated. The case of the putative Viking/Warrior grave at Prague Castle is a case in point. It involves four bodies (one long dead, two who died in world wars, and one more recently deceased), a historically and culturally significant landscape, ambiguous material culture, modern scientific analysis, and Nazi and Soviet ideology – all in collision, and configured and reconfigured by conflict across the twentieth century.

Prague Castle (Figure 1) has been the centre of the Czech state since the end of the ninth century, and home to the ruling dynasties of the Přemyslid, Luxembourgian, Jagiellonian and Habsburgian Dukes, Kings, and Emperors. In 1918, it became the presidential seat of the newly-established Czechoslovakia, and reconstructions for this repurposing began a year later. In 1925, archaeological research by Karel Guth, Head of the

Historical Archaeological Department at the National Museum (Figure 2b), aimed at discovering its appearance at the time of the most important Czech saint, Duke Wenceslas. Archaeology and reconstruction were planned for completion by September 1929, the millennial celebration of Wenceslas' death. The story of grave number IIIN199 found during excavations (Figure 3), and of its discoverer, Ivan Borkovský, is a mirror reflecting the fate of Czechoslovakia and Central Europe across the twentieth century.

Borkovský was born in 1897 in Ukraine, and joined the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915 to fight against the Russians (Figure 2a). He then fought in the 1917–1923 Civil War in Russia for the anti-Communist White Army, later switching sides to the Red Army. In 1920, he escaped to Czechoslovakia, and two years later began studying archaeology at the Charles University in Prague. By 1926, he was in charge of excavations and finds at Prague Castle as Guth's assistant, though publication was under Guth's control. There is little doubt that even by this time Borkovský himself was a contested body, whose country of origin was split by divided political loyalties and armed forces, and whose personal future would prove as controversial as that of the unknown body he would soon discover.

### **A grave discovered**

On 11 July 1928, the partially-preserved remains of a well-built male were found beneath the third courtyard of Prague Castle. Just 30 cm below the surface, laying in an eroded wooden chamber, the body was located on the edge of an old burial ground in the central and highest point of the hill-fort (likely belonging to the Middle Hillfort Period, AD 800- 950/1000). In all probability, the burial had originally been covered by a funerary mound (Figure 4). The cemetery had ceased to function before the eleventh century, when the hill was partially removed to build the Bishop's Palace. Nevertheless, the integrity of the surviving graveyard area was consciously respected/avoided when the later eleventh-century castle and a road were constructed (Borkovský 1946). The coeval laying of the courtyard's pavement protected the body for a thousand years.

During the excavation, the burial was lifted as a block and placed in the Old Royal Palace (Figure 5), where it was examined and conserved. The analysis of its material culture was to give rise to a contentious identification and later threaten its excavator's future. The body was buried head pointing west, its chamber 3m long by 1.2 m wide, with sides and bottom of oak, and the decomposed lid possibly of fir.



The burial goods included a set of weapons, an axe, two knives, and on the right side of the body a corroded 95.5-cm-long sword in a wooden scabbard with leather covering. By the right foot was a heavily-damaged iron axe with a 90 mm curved blade. A similarly corroded knife 176 mm long also had a wooden scabbard with leather covering, and the second knife with traces of gilding also corroded, lay by the left pelvis.

A decomposed leather bag was found above the pelvis and contained a small flint with use-wear, and a richly-wrought 97-mm-long fire-steel, with cut-out decoration on one side with trefoil-like elements. There was also a 118-mm-long corroded iron tool (possibly a razor). At the right-side corner of the chamber was a bucket with three reinforcing iron hoops and three iron handle loops – 12.5 cm to 15 cm tall, with a diameter between 22 cm and 23.5 cm.

### **The body acquired**

The burial lay at some distance from the castle's churches, and the material culture bore no resemblance to objects discovered in other Christian cemeteries at Prague Castle. These facts, together with Guth's and Borkovský's reluctance to publish the results of the excavation, was an open door to controversy and contested identity.

Into the gap left by Borkovský's silence flowed a stream of publications offering contrasting identifications. The first was a newspaper article by Guth published on the millennial anniversary of St Wenceslas' death (Guth 1929a). A second, also by Guth (1929b: 58), was a scientific text dating the grave to around AD 900, and identifying the occupant as an elite member of Castle society, perhaps of the princely family. In 1934, Guth published again, this time suggesting it could be the grave of Bořivoj I (d. ca. AD 890), or perhaps Spytihněv I (d. AD 915), two early Přemyslid Dukes of a Czech royal dynasty which ruled Bohemia and Moravia between the ninth and fourteenth centuries (Guth 1934). Fuelling the debate, Helmut Preidel, a Sudetenland German schoolteacher and archaeologist, identified it with another burial from Žatec in northern Bohemia found in 1932, and which he thought was connected to the Polish King Boleslaw I ('The Brave'), ruling between AD 1003 and 1004 in Bohemia (Preidel 1936/7). Preidel (1938) later maintained that Viking warriors were part of Boleslaw I's retinue, and were buried at Žatec and in Prague Castle. He regarded the inventories of both graves as belonging to the tenth century or perhaps later.

All of this put Borkovský on the horns of a personal as well as a professional dilemma. His doctoral dissertation of 1929 on Corded Ware in Central Europe had made explicit the

eastern influences in the material. Soon afterwards, in 1933, he renounced his Ukrainian nationality and was granted Czechoslovak citizenship. In 1939 he was appointed to a full-time position at the Institute of Archaeology in Prague. During these crucial years for his career, the Viking-related interpretations of the burial and others at Žatec were at their height. Whatever Borkovský thought, his silence on the matter, his inability to publish at the time, and the keeping of the burial and its grave goods in store rather on public display undoubtedly (if coincidentally) avoided potentially contentious publicity at a delicate time during which his new citizenship was being considered.

While his low profile on the matter suited his personal and professional lives, it was a fateful decision. On 15 March 1939, the Germans occupied the country, and forced his hand (Figure 7). Nazi ideology and the manipulation of the past became entwined with the problematic identification of the burial's remains. Archaeological evidence for Slav presence and identity ran counter to Nazi aims especially 'in eastern Europe where it was politic to prove previous Germanic habitation on the basis of material culture.' (Arnold 1990: 473), and thereby affirm the greatness of the German race – a process which 'helped to justify Nazi conquests and informed German policies in zones of occupation.' (Hare 2014: 1–2). The Prague Castle burial was a case in point, and tailor-made for 'ideological correction'.

Almost immediately, in 1940, German archaeologists accused Borkovský of suppressing the publication of the burial for nationalistic reasons because it proved the Germanic rather than Slavic origins of Prague Castle, as Vikings were Nordic like the Germans. This conflation of Viking/Nordic/German identity spoke to a supposed common racial community extending over national borders and reached deep into the past according to Hans Reinerth, the spokesman for the 'purification and Germanisation of German prehistory'. Reinerth had framed the dogma in 1936 in foreboding language: 'The eternal stream of blood binds us across the ages to those Nordic farmer's sons, who had to fight for southern German soil twice in the course of four millennia'. (Arnold 1990: 468).

Borkovský was an easy target, and exacerbated his predicament the same year by publishing a monograph on his identification of the oldest Slavic pottery in central Europe (Borkovský 1940). This was a significant contribution to European archaeology, but personally dangerous. German archaeologists quickly dismissed the idea and he was forced to withdraw it under threat of being sent to a concentration camp. The immediate German reaction was the publication also in 1940 of *Ist Böhmen-Mähren die Urheimat der Tschechen* ('Is Bohemia-Moravia the original homeland of the Czechs?') (Zotz & Von Richthofen 1940) which argued that Germanic peoples had inhabited Bohemia and Moravia continuously since

prehistory. Borkovský's publication was declared unconvincing and useless with the help of Kurt Willvonseder – the head of Heritage Management in Austria, Professor of Archaeology at Innsbruck University, and a Nazi Party member and SS Untersturmführer since 1939 (Figure 6c).

Borkovský's first publication of the burial was in 1941, some 13 years after its discovery. Once again, German pressure was behind it due to his above-mentioned book (most copies having been destroyed by the Germans). Ironically, the same Lothar Zotz, now in charge of Bohemian archaeology (Figure 6b) decided that the article should be published in the first issue of his new journal *Altböhmen und Altmähren* (*Old Bohemia, Old Moravia*). The original title of the article as Borkovský wrote it was 'A Warrior Grave from Prague Castle', but Zotz changed it to 'A Viking Grave from Prague Castle' (Borkovský 1941) without consulting him, and possibly altered some of the text as well.

The article as published was overt in its Nazi-influenced Nordic interpretation. Apart from the title, it stated explicitly that 'the grave of a Viking was discovered' (Borkovský 1941: 1). In particular was the identification of the 'fire-steel's' trefoil decoration as similar to that found on axes from Gotland and Öland (Paulsen 1939: 49, figs. 8 and 9). And then the sword, about which Borkovský, or perhaps his interpolator, added 'Finally, we have to mention that a sword found in neighbouring Silesia, which corresponds to our exemplar, has been interpreted by Zotz (1934) as German-Viking and dated into the 10th–11th centuries.' (Borkovský 1941: 181–182).

In that same year, in the same climate of Nazi occupation, a physical anthropological study of the remains was begun by Jiří Malý (Figure 6a). The report in Czech was never published, and exists only in typescript (Malý 1942). The main findings, based on an examination of only the skull and left femur, were that the individual possessed a 'strikingly' large skeleton some 175–176 cm in length, robust bones with pronounced muscle attachments, and was around 40 years old. The final point was explicit – the skeleton 'overall corresponds to a male of Nordic racial type'. (ibid.).

The end of the Second World War brought another change in the body's identity when, with Germany defeated, Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Soviets, and, after the Red Army's departure, remained under strong Soviet influence. This time, Borkovský only narrowly escaped being sent to a Siberian Gulag in 1945, possibly due to his anti-Communist activities two decades before, and particularly for his role as the Rector of the Ukrainian Free University in Exile (1939–1943). Explaining that he had been forced into the pro-Viking interpretation, he soon published his second article (Borkovský 1946), identifying the burial

now as an important person related in some way to the early Western Slav Przemyslid dynasty, in effect reverting to Guth's 1929 and 1934 views. This interpretation, reinforced retrospectively by his 1940 monograph on Slavic pottery, was in accord with the new Soviet regime.

Apart from the politics, the 1946 article dated the burial to before AD 900, specifically to the 860s, before the foundation of Prague Castle as a state centre and its oldest Church of the Virgin Mary. The warrior belonged to pre-Christian pagan times. Meanwhile, the Viking identification and dating of the burial, and the thesis of regional Viking presence fell apart. Preidel (1944) accepted Guth's interpretation and dating of the grave, admitting there were no Vikings buried at Prague Castle or Žatec.

Despite the pro-Slavic tone of Borkovský's 1946 publication, the issue of the warrior grave remained poisonous during the Cold War. During this time, he became director of the newly-established Department of Historical Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, which in 1952 became part of the Academy of Sciences organized along Soviet lines. Perhaps as a consequence during this difficult period, punctuated by the Prague Spring of 1968 and a new Soviet occupation (Figure 8), the grave block and its contents were mainly kept out of public view. While no further investigations occurred after 1946, Borkovský's views were accepted in important publications on Prague Castle and early medieval Bohemia (e.g. Borkovský 1972; Sláma 1977), and beyond (Maříková-Kubková *et al.* 2015).

The only discordant note was struck by the anthropologist Emanuel Vlček whose 1970s research on the skeleton argued against any Przemyslid connection, and offered a chronology closer to Guth's (1924, 1934), with a second half of the ninth century date (Vlček 1977: 44–51). The bones and grave goods were kept in storage for 58 years, being put on permanent public display only in 2004, well after Borkovský's death in 1976, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 – and fully 76 years after its discovery.

By the late 1940s, the burial had undergone a confused and confusing change of identities based in part on grave goods, but mostly to do with conflict and the shifting political and ideological conditions which ensued. At the same time, Borkovský's own identity had been changed by war, and at least in part was linked to the changing fate of the warrior burial. It is not difficult to see a connection between the living and the dead in these events. But this was not the full story, as there was another contested body linked to both world wars, both occupations, Czech identity and war heritage, and the location of the warrior burial.

## **Warriors, commemoration, and landscape**

The entangled conflict history of the warrior burial and its researcher was inextricably caught up with Prague Castle's early mortuary landscape and a third body whose identification, like the warrior, was also unknown, and which itself produced more political strife, and spent decades in limbo as a result. The multi-vocal nature of landscapes, their ability to change their nature and significance in light of shifting cultural and ideological imperatives is well illustrated by these parallel events.

A few metres from the spot where the burial would later be found, in 1918 a memorial to the Czech 'Unknown Soldier' of the First World War was planned, part of which was to be a monolithic granite obelisk, the other part a specially-dug subterranean cave (Figure 9) presumably to hold the remains of an unidentified Czech soldier killed at the 1917 Battle of Zborov in Ukraine (Malá 1997: 291). Even this was contested, however, because Czechs fought on both sides – volunteers for the Russians against their countrymen (including Borkovský) who were fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army. While the Russians lost the battle, their Czech troops fought so effectively that it strengthened the case for an independent state of Czechs and Slovaks after the war. For unknown reasons, this project in the castle courtyard was abandoned, and the Unknown Soldier memorial set up instead within Prague's Old Town Hall in 1922.

The obelisk was recycled, partly as a First World War memorial, but also (and increasingly over time) as a monument marking the tenth anniversary of the creation of Czechoslovakia (Figure 10). Meanwhile, on 12 July of that year, 1928, Borkovský had discovered the warrior burial just a few metres away, and the Castle's architect, Josep Plečnik, waited until the archaeological excavations were completed before deciding where to erect the obelisk between 31 October and 3 November 1928 (Malá 1997: 294).

Just over a decade later, during which the events described earlier unfolded, the two First World War-related monuments were impacted by the Nazi occupation. The Unknown Soldier memorial in the Town Hall was embroiled in conflict during 1941 when it became a nationalist flashpoint of Czech demonstrations against the occupation, and was demolished on the orders of Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich, leaving the anonymous body in limbo. Determined as Heydrich was to suppress Czech culture and Germanize (in fact, ultimately, eliminate) its population, it may be that this event alerted him to the potential of the obelisk becoming a new Czech rallying point. On 5 December 1941, Heydrich wrote to Emil Hácha the Czech State President, ordering the removal of the obelisk, but for some reason lost interest and was assassinated six months later (Malá 1997: 294). The obelisk survived.

After the war, in 1947, and marking the 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Zborov, the Czech army decided to re-establish the tomb of the Unknown Soldier inside the National Monument atop the city's Vítkov Hill – but now a different ideology came into play. The Zborov soldier's remains were re-politicised again, this time by Soviet embassy officials who intervened and stopped the transfer, possibly to avoid stirring memories concerning the role of that battle in creating the independent Czechoslovak state in 1918. In 1949, during restoration work at a military cemetery near Dukla, the remains of an unknown soldier were exhumed and taken to Prague. On 9 October, during commemorations of the fifth anniversary of the Battle of the Dukla Pass, where, in September/October 1944 Russian and Czech troops had defeated the Germans, these remains were interred in the National Monument. On 8 May 2010, the body of the First World War Unknown Soldier from Zborov was laid to rest alongside that of his Second World War Dukla counterpart, finally fulfilling the original idea of the monument after a gap of 61 years, to honour those who fell to liberate the Czech and Czechoslovak states.

### **The Viking returns?**

Stripped of politics and ideology, what is the burial today? Reassessing the material culture in light of recent scholarship sheds more light on who might have been interred at Prague Castle. One of the most interesting objects is the fire-steel, a standard item of Viking personal equipment, and not the usual shape of such items found in Bohemia. Although corrosion complicates identification, and the original was lost in the Prague floods of 2002, the surviving drawings are remarkably similar to other Scandinavian examples. And, as noted above, the trefoil extensions recall those found on axes from Gotland and Öland (Paulsen 1939: 49, figs. 8 and 9).

The sword too can be re-evaluated, albeit equivocally. Its guard and iron pommel appear to correspond to Petersen's type X (Profantová 2005; Androshchuk 2014), popular during the tenth century from Scandinavia across Europe to Poland, Moravia, and Rus, with Bohemian and Moravian examples most often associated with burials of the local elite. A total of 30 early medieval swords have been found in Bohemia, and out of 12 that can be identified four are type X (Profantová 2012: 172–173). Nevertheless, the sword may well belong to phase 2 of the Middle Viking Age (ca. AD 900–975) as represented on 'Viking' coins struck in York between AD 910 and 950, becoming widespread in Scandinavia around the mid-tenth century (Androshchuk 2014), two to three generations later than Borkovský



originally dated the Prague Castle burial, and for which the first quarter of the tenth century is now thought most likely.

The warrior's axe is unusual, belonging typologically to the broadaxes of Eastern type. Nevertheless, the evidence remains equivocal, because while the warrior's axe originally had lobes which are common in early mediaeval Bohemia, a similar shape of axe is found in graves with Viking equipment from the southern Baltic coast (Gossler 2014: 11). The corrosion makes comparative studies yet more difficult. The length of the largest knife suggests a possible weapon of probable Continental provenance, and thus not expected in a burial linked to Denmark (Eisenschmidt 2004).

The bucket is a relatively common component of grave equipment at this time, and has been found in 14 graves in and around Prague Castle dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries (Frolik 2014: 61–64). Interestingly, richer items such as jewellery and amulet-containers were found in eight of these. In Croatia, buckets are found in rich graves, dated to the ninth and tenth centuries along with fire-steels and swords (Petrinec 2009). Buckets are common in tenth-century southern Scandinavia burials however (Pedersen 2014), highlighting the international background of this custom including local Slavonic lords and Vikings from Denmark (Androschuk 2014).

The warrior grave's material culture is thus a mix of foreign (non-Czech) items such as the sword, axe, and fire-steel, and domestic objects like the bucket and the knives. The burial belongs to a well-equipped warrior, and the sword makes it unique – the only one in approximately 1500 early mediaeval graves in Prague Castle.

The material culture picture has become more detailed, yet also more complex, and even in combination with the more Viking-like burial customs (wooden chamber, burial mound), cannot alone make a renewed case for the Viking identification. Into this complexity it might be expected that new scientific techniques such as ancient DNA, stable and radio isotope analyses and advanced bio-anthropology could make a definitive contribution. Yet, after subjecting the burial's remains to a battery of such methods (probably surpassed only by Ötzi the Iceman) conducted in many laboratories internationally, the result remains inconclusive (publication in prep; see also Kaupová *et al.* 2018).

Perhaps brave Borkovský and all the others involved in this epic saga simply set the wrong agenda, emphasizing ethnicity over identity. Our warrior may well have regarded himself as a genuine Viking, and there are good reasons for assuming such. Yet he may actually have been a Slav from a neighboring region, who has mastered Old Norse as well as Slavonic, and who as a warrior and leader had lived a widely-traveled, adventurous, and

belligerent existence before he was laid to rest in Prague Castle. Does this perhaps more accurately reflect the realities of tenth century elite individuals than the outdated question of whether he was Germanic or Slav?

## Conclusions

The case of the ‘warrior burial’ is a potent example of politically-contested identity, where ideology forced multiple changes, and twentieth century conflict runs like a multi-strand thread throughout. The shifting personal circumstances of Ivan Borkovský, its excavator and interpreter, are inextricably interwoven with these events. The list of conflicts and political upheavals which contextualised the burial’s fate is a roll-call of the twentieth century’s momentous events: the First World War, the Russian Civil War, Czechoslovak independence, the Second World War and German occupation, and the Cold War and Soviet occupation. The body itself underwent a dizzying round of identifications, 1) just an important burial; 2) a Přemyslid Duke (if not Bořivoj, the founder of the dynasty); 3) a Nordic Viking; 4) an important Slavonic warrior; 5) an ‘invisible’ person caught in the liminal space of Prague Castle’s storerooms, and 6) today in the twenty-first century, perhaps an early European example of a leader whose complex identity was signalled by the multi-cultural collection of material culture which accompanied him to the afterlife.

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## Figures

Unless otherwise marked, all images are from the Institute of Archaeology of the CAS, Prague Castle Excavations, Borkovský's Archive.

Fig. 1: Prague Castle. View from the south (above) and ground-plan (below). A – Grave No. IIIN199; B – obelisk; C – Bishop's Palace; D – St. Guy's Rotunda; E – Virgin Mary Church; F – Main Gate.

Fig. 2: Ivan Borkovský (A) and Karel Guth (B).

Fig. 3: Photograph of grave IIIN199, shortly after excavation in 1928.

Fig. 4: Grave IIIN199, ground-plan and equipment. 1 – sword; 2 – bucket; 3 – fire-steel; 4 – flint; 5 – razor (?); 6-7 – knives; 8 – axe. (after VLČEK 1977:44)

Fig. 5: Moving the burial block in 1928.

Fig. 6: Jiří Malý (A), Lothar Zotz (B) and Kurt von Willvonseder (C).

(after: ANDĚL 1999: 617 and [www.muzeumprahy.cz/lothar-zotz /downloaded 10/09/2018/](http://www.muzeumprahy.cz/lothar-zotz/downloaded%2010/09/2018/) and OBERMAIR 2015: 158)

Fig. 7: Prague Castle during the visit of Heinrich Himmler in 1941. (after: UHLÍŘ & KLIMEK 2008:143)

Fig. 8: Czechoslovak president Gustav Husák and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Prague Castle in 1978. (after: KLAZAROVÁ 2003:473)

Fig. 9: Construction of the underground cave for the 'Unknown soldier' in 1918.

Fig. 10: Erecting of the obelisk in 1928.

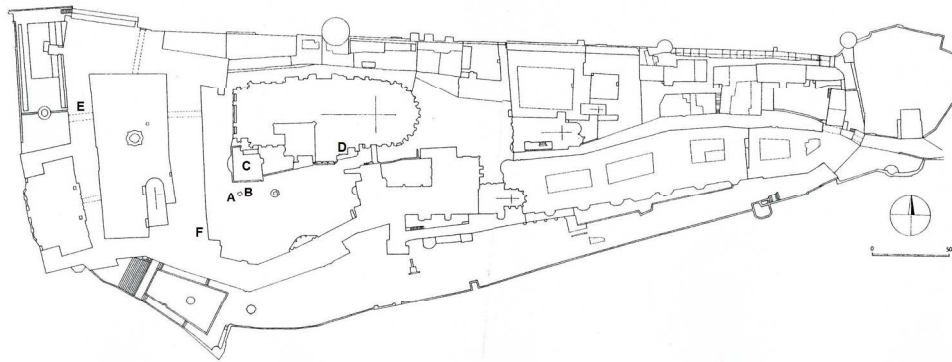


Fig. 1: Prague Castle. View from the south (above) and ground-plan (below). A – Grave No. IIIN199; B – obelisk; C – Bishop's Palace; D – St. Guy's Rotunda; E – Virgin Mary Church; F – Main Gate.

192x163mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Fig. 2: Ivan Borkovský (A) and Karel Guth (B).

166x127mm (300 x 300 DPI)





Fig. 3: Photograph of grave IIIN199, shortly after excavation in 1928.

351x653mm (96 x 96 DPI)



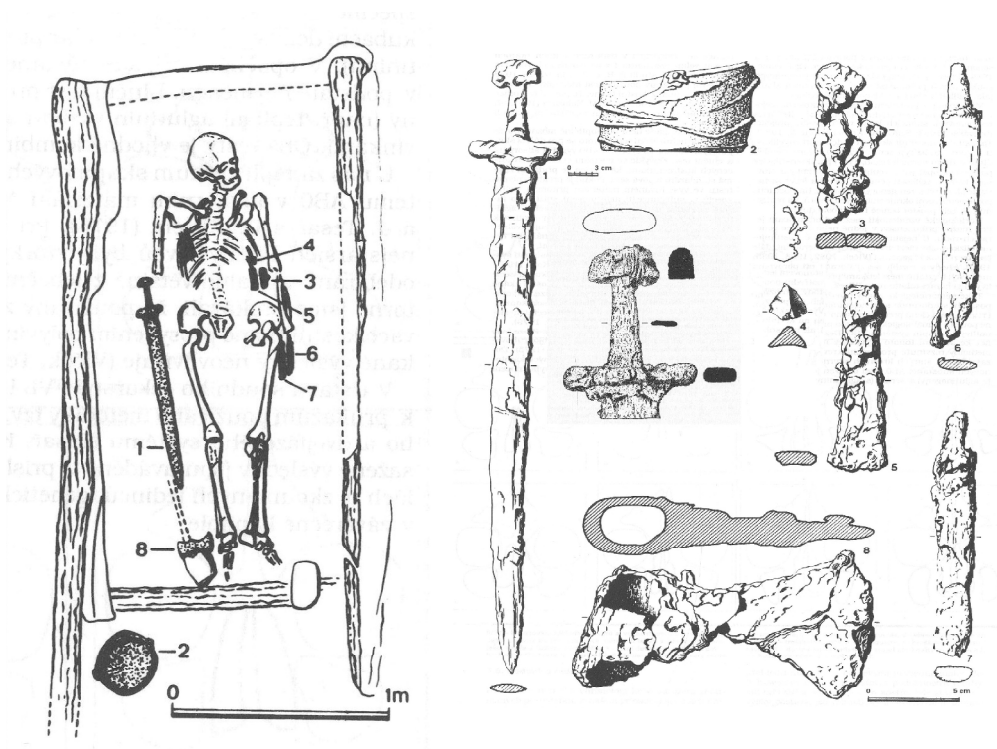


Fig. 4: Grave IIIN199, ground-plan and equipment. 1 – sword; 2 – bucket; 3 – fire-steel; 4 – flint; 5 – razor (?); 6-7 – knives; 8 – axe. (after VLČEK 1977:44)

265x199mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Fig. 5: Moving the burial block in 1928.

112x154mm (300 x 300 DPI)

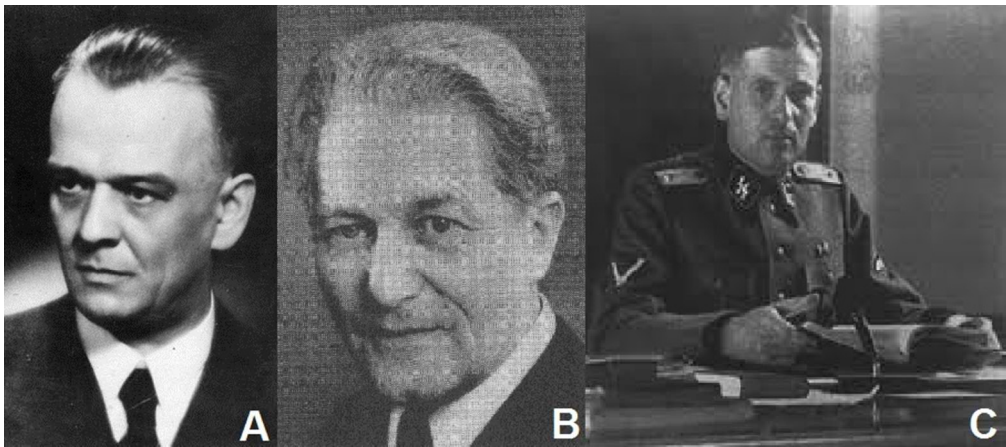


Fig. 6: Jiří Malý (A), Lothar Zotz (B) and Kurt von Willvonseder (C). (after: ANDĚL 1999: 617 and [www.muzeumprahy.cz/lothar-zotz/](http://www.muzeumprahy.cz/lothar-zotz/) downloaded 10/09/2018/ and OBERMAIR 2015)

229x101mm (100 x 100 DPI)

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Fig. 7: Prague Castle during the visit of Heinrich Himmler in 1941. (after: UHLÍŘ & KLIMEK 2008:143)

191x181mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Fig. 8: Czechoslovak president Gustav Husák and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Prague Castle in 1978. (after: KLAZAROVÁ 2003:473)

163x112mm (300 x 300 DPI)



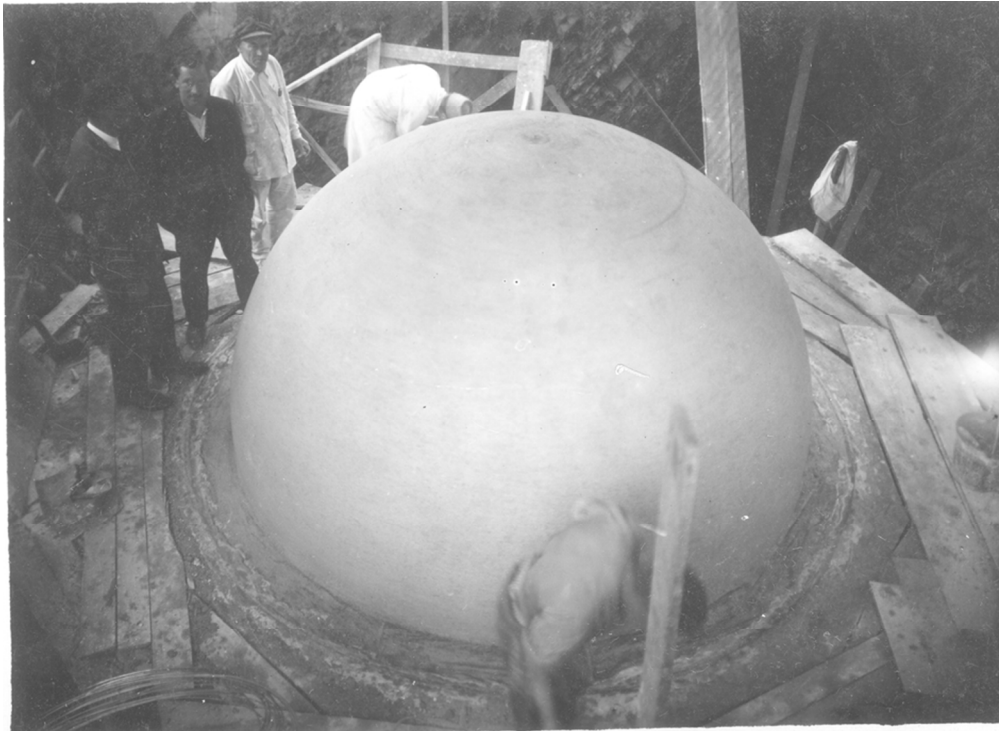


Fig. 9: Construction of the underground cave for the 'Unknown soldier' in 1918.

79x58mm (300 x 300 DPI)

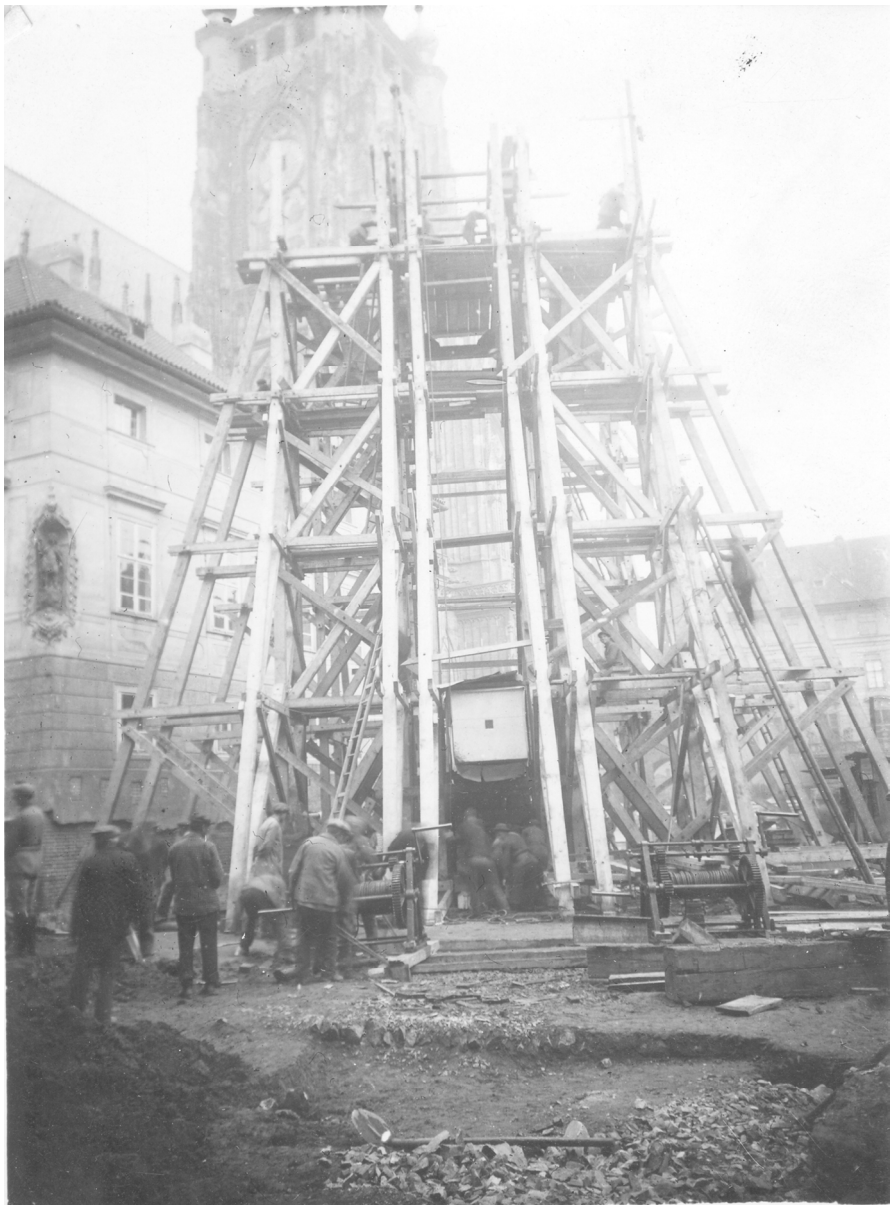


Fig. 10: Erecting of the obelisk in 1928.

110x150mm (300 x 300 DPI)